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AUTHOR Taylor, Edward W.
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ABSTRACT

The practice of fostering transformative learning was reviewed from an empirical perspective. In the literature, much support was found for Mezirow's ideals for promoting rational discourse and critical reflection, two of the three interrelated components he identified as central to the process of fostering transformational learning. Other factors of equal importance were identified, including fostering group ownership and individual agency; providing intense shared experiential activities; developing an awareness of personal and social contextual influences; promoting value-laden course content; capitalizing on the interrelationship of critical reflection and affective learning; and recognizing the demand of time. These significant concerns that warrant serious discussion and future research emerged from the review: the challenge of establishing authentic and helping relationships with students in the classroom when fostering transformative learning; the challenge of engaging and promoting affective learning; the need for clarification of what is unique about fostering transformative learning; the lack of understanding about transformative learning's impact on student learning; and the ethical issue of fostering transformative learning in the adult higher education classroom. (Contains 36 references.) (YLB)

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Edward W. Taylor
PennState Harrisburg

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Fostering Transformative Learning in the Adult Education Classroom: A Review of the Empirical Studies

Edward W. Taylor, PennState Harrisburg

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to review the practice of fostering transformative learning from an empirical perspective and to discuss the implications it has for teaching adults. The review finds much support for Mezirow's ideals for promoting rational discourse and critical reflection. Also identified are other factors of equal importance, such as group ownership, individual agency, experiential activities, value-laden course content, and the need for time. Future research needs to focus on the more subjective elements of fostering transformative learning, such as the role of relationships, how emotions are managed in the classroom to promote critical reflection, and the impact of fostering transformative learning on learning outcomes.

Literature Review, Classroom Teaching, Research

Introduction

Since the original research on transformative learning by Mezirow (1978) over twenty years ago there has been a growing body of instructional literature that offers practitioners who work in a variety of adult and higher education settings innovative methods and techniques for fostering transformative learning in the classroom (e.g., Anderson & Saavedra, 1995; Cranton, 1994, 1995; 1997; Fulton, Licklider, & Schnelker, 1997; Jamieson, Kajs, & Agee, 1996; Laiken, 1997; Mezirow, 1990, 1991; Nabben, 1995). Fostering transformative learning is a practice of education that is "predicated on the idea that students are seriously challenged to assess their value system and worldview and are subsequently changed by the experience" (Quinnan, 1997, p. 42). Despite the continued interest little is known about how the practice of fostering transformative learning actually looks in practice from an empirical perspective. An extensive review of the research on transformative learning revealed that "concepts of promoting and fostering transformative learning are the least empirically investigated" (Taylor, 1997, p.38). Only five studies were identified in this review that directly informed the practice of fostering transformative learning in an educational setting. In essence, adult educators are being encouraged to promote a form of teaching from an array of instructional text with not much understanding and/or evidence of what the educational implications and outcomes are for their students. Questions need to be addressed such as: What are the essential methods to facilitate a change of frame of reference in the classroom? What is the role of the students and teacher in the transformative experience? How do transformative practices influence learning outcomes? What are the responsibilities and risk? Possibly in response to the lack of research there has recently been an increase in studies exploring the application of transformative learning in the classroom with an additional 18 studies identified since my initial review. Therefore it is the purpose of this paper is to review the practice of fostering transformative learning from an empirical perspective and to discuss the implications it has for teaching adults. The framework for addressing the purpose involves a brief synopsis of what Mezirow identifies as central to fostering transformative learning theory, a discussion of a previous review on the topic, an explanation of how the studies were selected an analyzed, an overview of significant findings from this review, followed by an exploration of related implications for fostering transformative learning in the adult and higher education classroom.

Related Literature

Mezirow identified three interrelated components as central to the process of fostering transformative learning, that of the centrality of experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse. The learner's experience is the starting point and the subject matter for transformative learning (Mezirow, 1995). Experience is seen as socially constructed, so that it can be deconstructed, reflected and acted upon. It is the learner's experience that provides the substance for critical reflection, the second theme. Critical reflection is seen as the distinguishing characteristic of adult learning, which refers to questioning the validity of personal assumptions and beliefs based on prior experience. It often occurs in response to an awareness of a contradiction among one's thoughts, feelings, and actions. The third theme is rational discourse, a necessary medium through which transformation is facilitated and developed. However, in contrast to everyday discussions, it is used "when we have reason to question the comprehensibility, truth, appropriateness, (in relation to norms), or authenticity (in relation to feelings) of what is being asserted or to question the credibility of the person making the statement" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 77). It is within

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the context of rational discourse that critical reflection and experience interact. Rational discourse becomes the means by which critical reflection can be put into action, where experience is reflected upon and assumptions and beliefs are identified and questioned, and where new or revised interpretations of experience takes place.

From an empirical perspective, my initial review of over 35 studies involving transformative learning theory identified a number of factors that were of significance, even though only a few studies at that time had researched the practice of fostering transformative learning in the classroom. Those factors included recognizing the varying nature of how transformative learning is triggered and initiated, the significance of personal and social contextual factors that surround and shape the learning experience, the lesser role of critical reflection and an increased role of affective learning, and the significance of relational knowing. Now that a greater number of studies are available on fostering transformative learning the objective of this paper is to identify with greater specificity what the empirical studies reveal about this topic under review.

To accomplish the goal of this literature review searches were carried out on several databases (e.g., ERIC, Dissertation Abstracts International) using three criteria for selecting the studies on the fostering of transformative learning: (a) Mezirow's model of transformative learning as its theoretical framework; (b) a research focus that informed the practice of fostering transformative learning in an educational setting; and (c) a defined methodology section. In all, 23 studies were identified (inclusive of five studies from my earlier review, Taylor 1997) of which 19 exist only as unpublished dissertations. Each dissertation was obtained, read in its entirety and reviewed.

Settings and Methodologies

The studies reviewed examined how transformative learning was facilitated in a variety of educational settings. For example, they included learning in higher education (King, 1997; Vogelsang, 1993), classes in religious studies and adult education (Bailey, 1996; Brown, 1997; Herber, 1998; James, 1997; Kaminsky, 1997; Sokol, 1998), training of church members (Cusack, 1990; Johnson, 1997), technology instruction for ABE teachers (King, 1999), teacher education and nursing (Gallager, 1997; Heggie, 1998; Wilson, 1995), job, management, and leadership training (Kritskaya & Dirkx, 1999; Ludwig, 1994; Neuman, 1996; Pierce, 1986); inservice training for teachers and family life educators (Matusicky, 1982; McKinzie, 1997; Saavedra, 1995), self-help groups (Dewane, 1993), and in the use of computer-assisted rehabilitation (Russell, 1995). From a methodological perspective, most studies were qualitative in design, predominantly case studies, using primarily interviews and observations as methods of data collection. An example of quantitative study was one that involved a survey of four private colleges identifying students who experienced a perspective transformation within the context of their higher education experience (King, 1997). Significance of this study was the educational activities identified by the students as contributing to a perspective transformation.

One of the most revealing findings about the different methodologies and foci of these studies is the range of what constitutes the practice of fostering transformative learning. The same problem that I identified about the vague boundaries of what is meant by a perspective transformation, also extends itself to the practice of fostering transformative learning (Taylor, 1997). This lack of criteria for operationalizing the fostering of transformative learning is the direct result of most of the studies failing to review any previous research, let alone research on the study of transformative learning in general. In addition, this over site has also contributed to other shortcomings, such as a homogeneous view of learning, with a mere handful of studies (e.g., Herber, 1998; Vogelsang, 1993) exploring cultural differences in relationship to fostering transformative learning in the classroom. And only a few studies identified in this review addressed the issue of ecological validity, that of providing evidence that promoting the practice of transformative learning in the classroom resulted in valued student outcomes (Kagan, 1990). Beyond promoting change in a frame of reference, did students learn more about the subject at hand when transformative learning was fostered in the classroom as opposed to other teaching approaches? Despite these concerns the present research begins to reveal findings that not only support Mezirow's conditions for fostering transformative learning, but also other conditions equally significant.

Essential Practices

The review begins by finding support for the ideal conditions outlined by Mezirow (1991) in fostering transformative learning, such as the importance of safe, open and trusting environment for learning; using instructional practices that support a learner-centered approach and promote student autonomy and collaboration; and the importance of activities that encourage exploration of alternative personal perspectives and critical reflection. Also, other practices were identified that seem to have equal significance. They include the necessity of teachers to be trusting, empathetic, and caring; the emphasis on personal self-disclosure, and the importance of

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feedback and assessment. In addition, six themes are discussed below in greater detail in relationship to specific studies, which begin to illuminate essential practices of fostering transformative learning in the classroom.

Fostering group ownership and individual agency.

The studies in this review demonstrate that a "group setting" is the ideal medium for fostering transformative learning. It is the group milieu that provides an important medium for fostering group ownership and individual agency among the participants (e.g., Dewane, 1993; Gallagher, 1997; Heggie, 1998; Kaminsky, 1997; Kritskaya & Dirkx, 1999; Neuman, 1996; Pierce, 1986; Saavedra, 1995; 1996; Sokol, 1998). For two years Saavedra (1995) facilitated the Davis Teachers' Study group involving six teachers, meeting on a weekly basis with the intent to analyze issues and strategies related to the teaching in each participant's classroom, student learning, and the learning and knowledge development of each participant. She was able to show that placing teachers at the center (my emphasis) of their own learning in a critically reflective and social group setting contributed to a transformation. Much of the change among the participants involved developing self-awareness about the perceptions they held about students and parents and how they viewed themselves as teachers and learners. This study helps identify conditions for promoting group ownership and agency in relationship to transformative learning, such as the: a) importance for mediation of the different topics discussed; b) the need for time to reflect and self-evaluate; c) the need for participants to have the opportunity to share their social, political, and cultural history with each other in relationship to the overall objective and in a setting that makes an intentional effort to be collaborative and democratic, and d) the importance of embracing dissonance and conflict among group members with the intent to strengthen the group experience and provide future learning opportunities.

Providing intense shared experiential activities

A second theme is that fostering transformative learning requires educators to engage learners at times in intense shared experiential activities that help provoke meaning-making among the participants involved (Gallagher, 1997; Herber, 1998; King, 1999; Kritskaya & Dirkx, 1999). These activities often act as "triggers" provoking critical reflection and facilitating transformative learning, allowing learners to experience learning more directly and holistically, beyond a logical and rational approach. For example, Herber (1998) sought to precipitate a transformation in racial awareness among preservice teachers taking a foundation level course in urban education. Central to this study was a series of experiential activities designed to initiate and facilitate the transformative process, such as a tour of the National Civil Rights Museum (NCRM) in Memphis, Tennessee; a required participant observation of an African-American religious service, and reading of the novel "Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry" which portrays the segregation of African-American children in a Mississippi school system. Herber's study found that the museum tour served as a catalyst for the transformative process for several of the learners. This study and others reveal that involving learners in intense experiential activities accommodates many of the essential conditions necessary for fostering transformative learning. These activities offer a shared catalyst for change initiating a mutual context for groups to explore relevant issues. Also, within this shared experience, reason and discourse becomes more relevant and meaningful to those involved, and these experiences not only provide opportunities for learners to develop greater self-awareness, essential for transformative learning, but also offer ways to confront issues that they find painful and are often resistant to learning about.

Developing an awareness of personal and social contextual influences

Context refers to personal and social factors that play an influencing role when fostering transformative learning. Broadly speaking, these factors include the surrounds of the immediate learning event, made up of the personal and professional situation of the individual at that time, and the more distant background context involving the familial and social history that has influenced the individual growing up (Taylor, 1997). For example, McKinzie (1998), examined an on-line learning environment which provided opportunities for critical reflection in an effort to "illuminate those factors that contribute to the information literacy of educators and promote opportunities for transformative learning" (p. 22). She looked at the informational context (informational resources, technology and other delivery systems, and people within the institution) and its relationship to a small group of educators in an alternative program within a secondary school setting who were participating in a professional development course on using the Internet. The findings identified critical indicators reflective of a "transformative capacity" (p. 136), that of the ability of the informational context to facilitate personal change among the participants. "Transformation theory is based on personal change and that the identified capacity is descriptive of critical indicators in the informational context that seemed to support this process" (p. 136). The critical indicators include: people indicators (e.g., desire, commitment, collaborative culture, degree of computer literacy skills, prior experiences, time); access indicators (availability of the technology); and process over product indicators (project-oriented curriculum,

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nontraditional assessment methods). This study and others bring to light a host of challenges for the practitioner, such as requiring the development of a contextual awareness beyond the mere implementation of various teaching methods when fostering transformative learning.

Promoting value laden course content.

Several studies found that controversial and value-laden content played a role in fostering transformative learning (Kristskaya & Dirkx 1999; Vogelsang, 1993; Wilson, 1995). It seems that certain subject matter encourages and provokes critical reflection among learners more so than other content. For example, in a longitudinal study by Wilson (1995) who used transformative learning as a theoretical framework to examine the professional socialization of baccalaureate nursing students in the classroom, areas of content, discussion, and questions were identified that acted as triggers to critical reflection about personal and professional values. The content that held the most meaning for the participants involved issues about AIDS, abortion, wellness, spirituality, death and dying, and communication. The controversial content would provoke the learners to reflect on both their personal and professional values, which at times would be in conflict with each other. The findings of these studies reveal that use of value laden course not only provides an opportunity to promote transformative learning in the classroom, but poses a challenge for instructors who teach the less obvious politically and socially charged subjects, such as the hard sciences and the more skill-based courses.

Capitalizing on the interrelationship of critical reflection and affective learning

Recognizing the importance of affective learning and critical reflection is consistent with previous review, but how it is manifested in the classroom has only been recently been explored. As shown in the next study, it is the learners' emotions and feelings that not only provide the impetus for us to reflect critically, but also often provide the gist of which to reflect deeply. Neuman (1996) focused on the nature of critically reflective learning among a sample of participants from the intern program of the National Extension Leadership Development (NELD) Program which attempted to foster reflection framed within the basic principles of practicing transformative learning. The study identified several factors about the relationship of affective learning and the fostering of critical reflection in transformative learning in the classroom. For example, a prerequisite for the initial development of a Critical Reflective capacity (critical reflection and critical self-reflection) requires "acquiring the ability to recognize, acknowledge and process feelings and emotions as integral aspects of learning from experience" (p. 460). Two, the processing of feelings and emotions related to experience was both therapeutic (appreciation of working through negative feelings as essential for personal development) and enabling (expanded the power and scope of critical reflection). Three, the outcome of affective learning resulted in a "greater appreciation for differences, tolerance for ambiguity, and feelings for courage, self-trust and inner strength" (p. 463). Four, the processing of feelings and emotions related to experience was both therapeutic (appreciation of working through negative feelings as essential for personal development) and enabling (expanded the power and scope of critical reflection). Five, the outcome of affective learning resulted in a "greater appreciation for differences, tolerance for ambiguity, and feelings for courage, self-trust and inner strength" (p. 463). Sixth, episodes of critical self-reflection can involve intensive emotional experiences, particularly when students are grieving the loss of old meaning perspectives and the acquiring new ones. In essence, the significance of processing feelings increases the power and appreciation of critical reflection as formative when fostering transformative learning.

Recognizing the Demand of Time

The final theme is that of time. Adhering to the practices of transformative learning, particularly in a group setting, requires an inordinate amount of time, something that many regular adult and higher education classes do not have available (Gallagher, 1997). Kaminsky (1998) brings this issue to light, by exploring how "issues of action, voice, empowerment, and knowledge were enacted in practice" (p. 13). She found that observing the conditions outlined by Mezirow for promoting rational discourse resulted in a challenge "that inclusiveness in terms of stakeholder membership practically guarantees that groups will have different agendas about what needs to be done, making coming to a consensus an onerous, time-consuming task" (pp. 274-275). The lack of time puts a constraint on providing access to the voices of all the participants as well as coming to consensus around various group decisions.

Discussion and Future Research

On the surface, these findings about fostering transformative learning seem quite promising. The studies reveal that if instructors develop authentic positive relationships with their learners, use creative experiential activities, encourage group ownership and individual agency, discuss value-laden course content, are willing to engage learners on the affective level in concert with critical thinking, and have ample classroom time, change can be

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initiated among those predisposed to transformative learning. However, on a deeper level most of the research under emphasize the practical implications associated with encouraging learners to revise their meaning perspectives in the classroom. In particular, a number of significant concerns emerge from this review that warrant serious discussion and future research. First, is the challenge of establishing authentic and helping relationships with students in the classroom when fostering transformative learning. Previous research revealed that developing positive relationships are most significant to promoting meaningful rational discourse, which is one of the fundamental components of transformative learning (Taylor, 1997). Unfortunately, most studies about fostering transformative learning overlooked the teacher–student relationship factor, and when they did give it attention, they tended to avoid the more subjective elements (e.g., trust, honesty, genuiness) essential to relationship building. Second, is the challenge of engaging and promoting affective learning with students in the classroom. Affective learning is not only the precursor to reflection, but is often rooted, as Saavedra (1995) found, in conflict. This finding poses real challenges to the teacher in the adult higher education classroom. Since transformative learning has the potential to be a deeply emotional experience, it demands considerable knowledge and skill of teachers to facilitate change responsibly and effectively. Third, is need for clarification of what is unique about fostering transformative learning in contrast to other teaching practices in adult and higher education. Since many of these studies inadequately operationalized the practice of fostering transformative learning within previous research about Mezirow's theory it is difficult to ascertain what is unique about this particular practice of teaching adults. Fourth, is the lack of understanding about transformative learning's impact on student learning/outcomes. For example, as a result of fostering transformative learning in an ABE classroom, are adult learners more successful at reading and writing? In essence, will student learning be greater and more significant in a transformative classroom? Fifth, is the ethical issue of fostering transformative learning in the adult higher education classroom. Education is a social activity involving the interaction of people who have differing views about the right way to teach. Just because some adult educators believe that fostering transformative learning is in the best interest of their learners, it may not reflect the wishes and desires of the learners themselves or even the institution in which they are enrolled. Do we have the right to challenge learners to change and transform? How ethical is it to create conditions that will put learners in such emotionally challenging classroom experiences?

This review of the empirical literature offers only a beginning into the essential practices of transformative pedagogy in the adult education classroom. Teachers and students who are willing to engage each other in open and safe group settings, participate in challenging experiential activities, and explore learning beyond the rational to include the extrarational, have the potential for a transformative learning experience. However, there is a caveat that adult educators have to be aware of, such that we are entering an arena that we are only beginning to understand, with still much remaining unknown. Therefore, it is imperative that, as we embark on the journey of promoting transformative learning, we do so responsibly and with our eyes wide open.

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